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A taste of the past

Parish preserves cherished recipes

By Amy Brenner-Fricke Heritage T&G Editor

SOUTHBRIDGE- Many people have fond memories of a certain dish prepared by their parents or grandparents - perhaps the smell of cinnamon triggers the flavor of a favorite cookie, or maybe the approach of cold weather creates a longing for the comfort of Nana's stew.

For most of us, the memories remain just that: A nostalgic stroll down memory lane.

Parishioners at Saint Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church, however, are determined to keep those food traditions alive for their children and grandchildren - and anyone else who wants to learn them.

Originally built in 1912 by immigrants who arrived in the region from various villages in Albania, Saint Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church holds the distinction of being the first church in the United States "to be constructed by Orthodox Christians for the express purpose of worshipping God in the Albanian language," according to the church's records.



Violet Southard helps prepare food for St. Nicholas Albanian's Café.

The new arrivals brought with them a desire to work hard and gain their own share of the American dream. They also brought with them their traditions, their customs - and their recipes, said parishioners Louise Majewski and Virginia Rapo, both of Southbridge.

According to Mrs. Majewski, a lot of those customs and traditions involved food.

"Food is important to a lot of the holy days," she said. "I remember as a child celebrating people's Name Days. We would bake all these sweets, and people would come to share them. The sequence of passing the tray was important, too - you served the spoon sweets first, then a soda, then Turkish coffee with baklava. And the tray had to go first to the oldest man in the room. From oldest to youngest. That was the sequence."

"We were raised with these recipes," said Ms. Rapo, whose parents, Polikseni and Zaharia Rapo, were born in Albania and emigrated in 1937 and 1925, respectively. "We're really tied to the old country, and we've tried to maintain a lot of the customs."

As the children of the original immigrants married and started their own families, they wanted to continue preparing the old foods. However, it dawned on them that none of the recipes had been written down anywhere, said Mrs. Majewski, whose parents, Dmitri and Arsinoi Jovan, arrived in Southbridge in the 1920s from a village near Korca.

"At the time, a lot of us had young families of our own. Nothing was written down - the recipes were all in our heads. We would cook with a juice glass of this, a handful of that," she said. "There were those who were intimidated about trying the recipes because they didn't know the right amounts of anything. We were afraid all these wonderful foods would be gone."

In 1973, a committee was formed at the church to record the oral history of the recipes, the customs and the traditions. The project was a large undertaking, said Mrs. Majewski.

"When I say we started from scratch, I really mean it," she said. "We told our parents and

grandparents to keep a pad of paper by the stove so they could record the ingredients and amounts used in each recipe. It took us a year to gather all of the recipes. There are over 100 of them in the book."

"There were no other cookbooks with Albanian recipes, so we had to create our own," said Ms. Rapo.

After collecting the recipes and putting them into a readable format, the committee published the first edition of "From Albanian Kitchens" in 1974. Additional printings followed, the most recent in 1982.

Last year, several members of the original cookbook committee decided it was time to revise and republish the book with the help of the "Daughters of St. Nicholas," the philanthropic women's group at the church. Taking on the task were Ms. Rapo, Mrs. Majewski and Louisa Nasse of Holland. They were joined on the project by another parishioner, Barbara Zlotnick of Ashford, Conn.

"We wanted to fine-tune the directions and update them," said Ms. Rapo. "Although we are familiar with the foods, we found that other people had questions."

This time around, group members tested each recipe for taste and ease of directions.

"The first time, we just took their word for it. After all, the recipes came from our mothers and fathers - they must be right!" said Mrs. Majewski with a laugh. "But everyone makes them a little differently. This time we went through them recipe by recipe."

The revised edition of "From Albanian Kitchens" features more than 120 recipes, including appetizers and beverages, soups and salads, vegetables and side dishes, main courses, Lenten specialties, breads, Albanian pies, pastries and ethnic sweets.

The cookbook also serves as an ethnic tutorial of sorts, as it includes a brief history of the church and the Daughters of St. Nicholas, as well as descriptions of Albanian customs and holy days.

The front cover boasts a drawing by Ruth Sanderson, a children's book illustrator and parishioner.

"It's a real sense of accomplishment, to have it there for our children and grandchildren," said Mrs. Majewski. "If we had waited to do this, all this would have been gone."

The cookbook will be on sale for \$12 at the church's annual Albanian Kitchen and Bazaar, held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 3 at the church, 126 Morris St.

An Albanian-style café will offer ethnic foods, including traditional Albanian spinach and leek pies, baklava, cookies, soups, cabbage rolls and casseroles. The event will also feature jewelry, a Christmas table and children's books illustrated by Ms. Sanderson.

"From Albanian Kitchens" can also be purchased by sending a check or money order for \$15 (which includes \$3 for shipping and handling). Make the check payable to "St. Nicholas Orthodox Church" and send to the church, 126 Morris St., PO Box 650, Southbridge, MA 01550. All proceeds will benefit the church.

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